



Image credit: US Navy/Todd Flack

SimLEARN

The VA is leveraging simulation and networks to bring education and training across the VHA. Chuck Weirauch explains.

Recognizing the value of simulation technology for medical training and education, the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is implementing its Simulation Learning, Education and Research Network (SimLEARN) throughout its entire system of more than 170 Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical centers: work has begun on the SimLEARN National Center in Orlando.

A national program, the purpose of SimLEARN is to develop and manage a strategic and operating plan for the provision of simulation education, training, and research across the VHA. The SimLEARN program proposal was approved by the US Under Secretary for Health in July 2009.

The SimLEARN National Center will be located on the campus of the new Orlando VA Medical Center which is part of the new "Medical City" campus at Lake Nona. The National Center is scheduled to open its doors in June 2012. Once in operation, the Orlando facility will feature inpatient and outpatient settings and

research areas for new simulation modalities. The center staff will also be responsible for the development of simulation-based curricula to address high-priority clinical needs and the distribution of this training and education material via the national SimLEARN network.

"What we began to realize was that as some of our facilities began to develop partnerships with their affiliates for simulation training and education, we were not acting as a system in terms of our investments in that area," said Louise Van Diepen, VA Deputy Chief Learning Officer. "We also were missing the opportunity to use simulation system-wide as a modality to address critical clinical priorities and to set a national agenda for which priorities will be addressed using simulation. We also wanted to grasp the opportunity to raise the level of practice in simulation education and training across our system and standardize it where it made sense to standardize it."

The VA is focusing on medical simulation because it improves the quality of

care to the patient, Van Diepen explained. Simulation creates a safe environment for learners where they can make mistakes without harming patients, and it is a cost-efficient, effective mechanism for training on new procedures and technologies with a demonstrated effectiveness in other areas, such as flight simulation, she added.

"There is also a growing body of literature in the medical education area that cites the effectiveness of clinical simulation for training medical students and residents," Van Diepen said. "We intend to translate that to improvements in workplace performance."

The VA has established a SimLEARN Website (www.simlearn.va.gov), and is producing a SimLEARN newsletter through which it distributes information on the latest applications of medical simulation technology throughout the VHA system.

The agency plans to start delivering curricula via the SimLEARN network before the Orlando National Center opens in 2012. They will initially focus on developing hands-on curricula for several medical simulation applications, including mannequin-based simulation, virtual patients, standardized patients, virtual environments, and haptic and non-haptic task trainers. A SimLEARN Steering Committee is to put together a priorities list for the Center to develop training solutions that address the most critical clinical education needs. Top administrative staff has been hired, and leased space has been arranged in Orlando pending completion of construction in 2012. All support staff will be in place by October of this year, with Center design work completed by December 2010.

The VA decided to establish the Center in Orlando because of the concentration of modeling and simulation expertise and resources in the Orlando area. Van Diepen explained: "We felt that Orlando provided a lot of synergies as it relates to simulation. We are working with a lot of our Department of Defense partners there, such as the Army's Program Executive Office for Simulation, Training and Instrumentation, and others such as the University of Central Florida's Institute for Simulation and Training. The National Center and the Orlando VHA medical center will be located at the Lake Nona Medical city there, and that area has already created its own synergies." **ms&t**